

INTERVIEW II

DATE: February 15, 1979
INTERVIEWEE: ROBERT L. PHINNEY
INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE
PLACE: Mr. Phinney's residence, Austin, Texas

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G: That's really germane. You say initially when the NYA moved in--

P: They were brand new. They had nothing to start on, a measly--

(Interruption)

Mr. Johnson and his initial staff that he selected immediately got with us, as they were starting from scratch. They had no procedures worked out, anything like that. I would imagine that the folks in their national office in Washington would say maybe that's a good place to start. So all of us in the WPA district office there in the same building, the Littlefield Building, were just real happy to help them get started with all of the procedures and forms and everything else they needed. We had myriads of forms even in the employment division to put people on payrolls, take them off, everything else. The engineers did the same thing in helping them get started, telling them how we did these things, how to originate projects and getting local political subdivisions to get interested in worthwhile projects and then help them actually make applications with sufficient information and forms, again, for questionnaires and everything else that was involved there. The accounting division of course was the same situation.

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G: Do you recall how they ended up in the Littlefield Building to begin with, why their office was located there and who picked the office space?

P: Never did think about it to tell you the truth. I think probably it was not that we were in there, but because space was there and it was a good central location, plenty of space, because they did have quite a vacancy percentage in that building.

G: Had you met Lyndon Johnson before?

P: No. I had heard about him but never met him.

G: Do you recall the first time that you met him?

P: I think the then-director of this district office, an old boy by the name of Wayman took all of us division chiefs up to Johnson's office at his invitation. He told us how much he was going to be dependent upon us, hoped that we would do everything we could to help them get things started. We promised that we'd pull out all the stops for him. All of us were very impressed with him from the start, of course. He was just that kind of an individual. We had a lot of extra work doing it but we were happy to do it.

G: Where was the WPA office in that building, the district office?

P: I think most of us were on the fifth floor. I'm trying to remember which floor Lyndon was on, either sixth, seventh or eighth. I'll be doggoned if I can remember. Of course as time went on they had to have more space, being a statewide organization.

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- G: Of course they didn't move to San Antonio. Was there an effort to get them located in San Antonio right away or was this something Mr. Drought worked on?
- P: I think that was purely a WPA deal. Harry Drought being state administrator or whatever you call him, he wanted it down there because he had a law practice and he wanted to still look after a little of his law practice I imagine, besides not wanting to leave home any more than I did. I don't recall, maybe I just wasn't in a position to know, but I think I would have heard if there had been any big urge to get Lyndon Johnson to move the NYA offices there. As I recall, there was no real necessity for all of them being together. I'm sure Harry Drought would have loved to move it down there, for San Antonio, but since they were completely separate--from my knowledge of the situation I know they were completely separate. Otherwise they wouldn't have had to work out all of their procedures and so forth.
- G: Why did President Johnson not want the NYA office to be in San Antonio? Why did he want to keep it in Austin?
- P: Part of it is speculation on my part but I think he felt it was a lot better, being the state capital and all this sort of thing, to stay here. I think he was right, there was no real reason to move to San Antonio.
- G: It does seem like there were some advantages being in the state capital.
- P: Yes.

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- G: But also he would achieve a measure of geographic separation from Mr. Drought's office. Do you think he considered that?
- P: Which I think was good. I think it was good, because they were completely separate organizations. I think it was probably within Lyndon Johnson's thinking, "I don't want to be too close." Maybe it was that way because I think it was a good decision.
- G: In other states I gather that the NYA was almost subordinate to the WPA.
- P: Well, it certainly wasn't here. They, I'm sure, had some problems. I'm not really acquainted with any that came up back in those days. There was no reluctance on the state [WPA] department's part on allowing us to do whatever we wanted to in helping them, the NYA state office, get set up. In fact, they encouraged us. We didn't need any, but they did. So I think it was a good move.
- G: Lyndon Johnson had a reputation for being able to seek out people who were valuable or useful in other agencies or departments and actually putting them to work for him. Did he do that with you during this period?
- P: Not overly so. We were together a lot and of course had to work long and hard on the details of some of these procedures and so forth. I guess besides old Griff [L. B. Griffith] I was one of the closest ones in the WPA that stayed that way.
- G: Did he use you as a liaison with Mr. Drought?
- P: No. No, he didn't really.

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G: Did you ever see them together? Did you get any insight into the rapport between the two men?

P: I don't recall ever seeing them together.

G: Really?

G: They must have been very different.

P: Oh, very, very.

G: How would you contrast them?

P: Harry Drought was an old staid, conservative guy, fairly smart but from a legal standpoint. But as far as new ideas I doubt that he ever had many. He had some real great people with him. One of them was this fellow, Bob Smith, we've talked about, who was a tremendous man. I learned to respect him a whole lot.

G: Why? What was his strength?

P: Vision, judgment, articulate, in every sense of the word he was a real great man for the place. He had some other great people. His chief engineer, a fellow named Robert Colglazier [?], who later became a general, an engineer, in the army, a real fine fellow. He had others. A fellow named Crain was head of the employment division and was my immediate boss. He was a great fellow. We didn't have to have the leadership and the visions for new ideas and so forth, because ours was more of a pick-and-shovel job of getting things done with the thousands of people we had to get on and off these jobs and everything else.

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- G: I gather there were ways in which the NYA had to depend on the WPA, for example, getting lists of certified families that had youths of this age, NYA age.
- P: Probably so. I was not involved with anything like that. I would imagine that a lot of information came from the old Texas Relief Commission rather than directly from WPA. I would think it more feasible that they needed to work, again, statewide with the state office in San Antonio, like they did with us as far as our sixteen counties were concerned, getting entree to the county commissioners, the city councils, the mayors and all that sort of thing, and finding out what WPA was doing and had done so they could be thinking along other lines and other areas as far as good worthwhile projects.
- G: I suppose there was some formula for putting NYA youths to work on projects, maybe one in ten, or one youth for every eleven heads of family or something like that. Is that [true]?
- P: I don't recall any of that. Now I left before the thing was all over because our 36th Infantry Division, Texas National Guard, was called into service in November of 1940. So I went on military leave and left the outfit. Whether or not they had any problem subsequent to that that I would have no way of knowing.
- G: What sort of things would Lyndon Johnson ask your office to do, the WPA office in Austin?
- P: Well, it's no small task to start a big statewide organization, even for procedures. So that was the big problem right off the bat, as well as any way they or we could think about it in the way of helpful

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advice, where they might start out looking for, again, these worthwhile projects. Because Lyndon was adamant about staying away from the leaf-raking angle for projects just as much as we were. He proved it, [he] didn't have any. Of course he was a master at getting the mayors and their councils and the county commissioners, everybody involved with starting projects, a master at getting them to really do something worthwhile that would leave these kids with something to remember instead of raking leaves.

G: Was this practice of establishing these local advisory committees something that the WPA had done, too, or was this something original?

P: No, I don't think WPA had one. He did I think from the start.

Something else, thinking about him not wanting to move to San Antonio and get under any sort of influence as far as the WPA was concerned, he knew especially from the national Washington level that he had more entrees and would get more things done than the WPA ever thought about. So he didn't want to get involved any way like that. He never expressed this but the whole office knew it. Plus he figured he and his staff could do a better job in selling these local political subdivisions than the WPA maybe had done.

G: You talked about interpreting regulations and procedures and guidelines. The record seems to indicate that he and his NYA people spent a lot of times in the evenings over at his house on the weekends going over the regulations and everything. Were you ever drawn into any of these meetings?

P: Yes.

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- G: Can you recall them and describe what they were like?
- P: I really can't. Some of them were just spadework, that sort of thing. I don't want to misrepresent things, I wasn't in on a lot of those type meetings over at their apartment, or house after they moved on Happy Hollow Lane. I was there a number of times, but most of them were more social than a work session from my standpoint.
- G: He lived in Dr. Bob Montgomery's house for a while.
- P: Right, sure did. I was over there a number of times.
- G: Did Mrs. Johnson play an active role in any of these get-togethers?
- P: Always there. Always.
- G: What was her role there? Would she join in the meetings?
- P: Yes, because the President always asked her opinion. So everybody got used to that right quick. He'd get her involved in conversations about any and everything.
- G: I gather one of the problems that he had with the WPA was payroll, the fact that his payroll was often delayed because they would have to do their own payroll first and get around to NYA. Do you recall that as being something that he tried to expedite?
- P: I have a vague recollection about some of these problems, because of course they did have the mechanics for the state payroll in San Antonio, although our district involvement really wasn't much except to hear him say something about some of their troubles once in a while. But I don't recall anything in detail.
- G: Anything on any of the NYA projects, the roadside parks or the sewing room projects or anything here that you recall from your perspective?

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P: I saw a number of them. But we were so busy with our own they didn't ask us to get involved with them in any way. I know we in WPA were pretty proud of how they got about it with alacrity about getting these projects on the road.

G: They had an advisory board, an advisory committee, which Senator Wirtz chaired. Do you recall that at all?

P: I only knew they had it. I never attended any of their sessions.

G: Did you get any insight into the friendship between Alvin Wirtz and Lyndon Johnson during this period?

P: I knew of course that it existed and they were extremely close, but it was in the following years, later years, that I really got to know Senator Wirtz.

G: Wirtz had an office in the same building, didn't he, in the Littlefield Building also?

P: I thought he was in the Brown Building. I think he was.

G: I knew he was later, but--

P: I don't recall him being in the building there.

G: I have a note here that LBJ had a friend in Washington with the WPA named Lawrence Westbrook. Do you remember him at all?

P: I sure do. He later headed the--what did they call it?--~~Rural~~ Rehabilitation Commission, ~~more~~ the farm and rural and so forth. He was a Waco fellow. In fact, I knew his son who was in our 36th Division. And Westbrook actually set up an office in the Littlefield Building later. We got to see him frequently.

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- G: Anything on his association with LBJ that is of note?
- P: No, I really don't, except knowing that they were close friends.
- G: There was evidently a WPA coordinating board in Washington that would approve new projects. This slowed things down a bit as far as he was concerned. Do you recall his efforts here to get things moving?
- P: Sorry, I sure don't.
- G: Normally if he wanted to meet with Harry Drought or talk to Harry Drought, would he phone him, would he go down there and have a conference with him? How did that generally work?
- P: I have no personal knowledge of that either. Being the telephone man that Lyndon was, I'm sure he was on the telephone a lot.
- G: What do you think his attitude toward Harry Drought was? I guess he was a [John Nance] Garner man, Harry Drought, an older fellow who didn't seem to have the sense of urgency that he had. Did he ever express his view to you here?
- P: Never did as such. I think we all realized it, as far as that's concerned, but he never did talk to us much about it. So he had his troubles with the San Antonio office down there that we just didn't get in on.
- G: From your perspective was he able to work things out satisfactorily with the state WPA office?
- P: Well, not to his satisfaction, I'm sure, because he wanted things done a hell of a lot quicker. I don't recall how long it took him to work out this payroll deal. And you can understand where the

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WPA office was interested in their own job, the first responsibility, and getting to the NYA when they could. I think if they'd had some sort of semblance of the Johnson attitude and urgency they would have done a lot better from the start.

G: What do you think motivated him as NYA director? Why did he have this drive?

P: He'd always had the drive, I understand, and of course it was pretty evident that even when he was in Washington being--what did they call it, the speaker of the Little Congress?--we'd all heard about him. His drive was I think always to get something done, do it right, do it as quickly as possible. Of course, he had a real strong feeling of why the urgency, because of the need of these kids. So it wasn't purely a situation of being successful for Lyndon Johnson. He was being successful for the whole idea of the National Youth Administration and to get something done.

G: He was really evidently able to fire up the people who worked under him.

P: Always had been.

G: What is it about him that enabled him to do this?

P: Well, I guess it's a little difficult to put in words. But he always had the ability when buttonholing people to get them to agree with him about the urgency and the importance of anything and leave them fired up as a result of it. Then, too, if they proved not to get fired up, he was a great one with that long sharp needle to tell them, "Now if you don't get fired up you're not going to stay."

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You don't belong to the team." So even those that may not have ever experienced the needle to much extent knew about other instances. A lot of them admired him for it, of course, especially those that hadn't experienced the real tough deal. Because he knew when to use it and the folks that needed it. So I think most of the people that were involved anyway were glad to see him really get on these people that needed to be.

G: Can you recall an instance during the NYA period where he did that?

P: I really can't because I wasn't close enough. I just knew the reputation.

G: As you look back after knowing him all these years, what was the significance of the NYA experience in his life?

P: I think it meant a great deal to him to be in position and be successful, to really give the help, aid and assistance that these young people needed. It was not just a matter of personal satisfaction. A lot of it was that, of course, but realizing the need that existed he was just hellbent for election to get something done about it and did.

G: Do you think that his cohorts in the NYA served as sort of the base of a political organization in Texas later on?

P: Maybe you could call it a base as far as those individuals tried and proven with him in NYA in being close to him, helped him, advised with him when he asked for it and offered it. Of course these people who worked for him were scattered out all over the state. They believed in him from the start just like everybody

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else that ever had any close contact with him. So I know they all did their utmost to help him every way possible. But whether or not you can say that's a base. . . . You've got a lot of things to think about in a political campaign. A very important start is the financing. These relatively young people that he worked with in NYA and within his administration were not financial folks. So I'm sure that the hundreds if not thousands of people with whom he came in contact, again starting with the local political subdivision officials, were sold on him just like everybody that worked for him.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview II]

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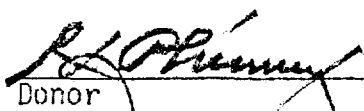
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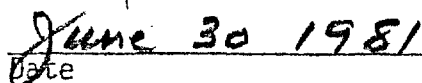
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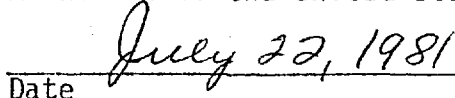
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